

Random Encounters

Dead Guys on Parade

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The Mastermind Revealed?

This week's installment presents the final undead stalker sent by a mysterious master villain to kill the player characters of your campaign. As noted in previous parts of this series, the identity and powers of the mastermind are left to DMs to determine, but this week's article includes advice on how to adapt the undead creature detailed herein to become that evil mastermind for DMs who need one.

The undead being that is now sent after the PCs is a swordwraith. The swordwraith is actually an undead template that can be applied to any humanoid or monstrous humanoid that had fighter levels while it lived. The template is detailed below; DMs are encouraged to apply this template to one (or perhaps more) past fighter foes of the heroes who now (or so the PCs think) lie in musty graves -- victims of the heroes' righteous might. The mastermind villain could have learned enough about the PCs to have found these dead foes and created swordwraiths from them, thus allowing the forgotten foes a chance at revenge. Alternatively, DMs can take the sample NPC fighter write-ups from Chapter 4 of the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and apply the template to an NPC of an appropriate level.



This portion of Part 4 assumes that the swordwraith is merely the latest minion sent by the evil master villain to torment the PCs. (For those DMs seeking the mastermind itself, see the "Mastermind Option" below.) Swordwraiths are mentioned in the *Fiend Folio* as being mercenaries so devoted to their craft that they carry on waging war even after death. Broadening that interpretation allows us to use dead past foes of the PCs themselves to serve as the fodder from which the swordwraiths are made. Perhaps the heroes encountered an evil mercenary troop at some point, they fought against the warriors of an evil cult or secret society, or they may have eliminated a band of evil soldiers or a den of evil creatures. After all, what self-respecting party of PCs hasn't wiped an orc, gnoll, or bugbear warband in its history?

Once you know where the swordwraith came from, it's time to send it at the PCs. Be certain to apply the template to a creature with sufficient levels to challenge the party on its own. Also, don't forget to equip it as you would any other NPC foe of the heroes -- the gear and magic items were those the swordwraith had while it lived. (If any of the PCs ever took a magic item from a dead foe and that foe is now a swordwraith, that undead will likely make the PC looter its first target.) Or, the master villain could have learned from past encounters that sending just one (or two) seekers of the heroes' lives simply leaves the undead too outnumbered to prevail, and so she prepares a larger number of swordwraiths to attack the PCs -- perhaps she sends as many as there are heroes.

When and where this attempt on the heroes' lives takes place remains up to the DMs. Since this may well be the climactic battle of this series of events (at least until the characters find the master villain), this battle should be grand in scale and deadly in the extreme. Don't forget to have the foe utter the following words, if you wish: "I am sent to destroy you, and so you shall die."

Mastermind Option: The aforementioned option to make this swordwraith the actual mastermind behind this series of attacks requires a bit more work on the part of DMs, but the payoff can be worth it for those DMs who want to subject their players to this series of events but lack a suitable villain to play the role of the mastermind behind it all. The swordwraith template can be applied to humanoid and monstrous humanoid creatures that possessed levels in the fighter class while they lived. Nowhere in the template does it say that the humanoids must have had class levels in only the fighter class. A swordwraith with multiple levels in wizard, cleric, or sorcerer (and the right assortment of magic items, including a *crystal ball* with *clairaudience*) could provide the means by which the mastermind observes the PCs and sends the parade of undead killers after them. Such a creature would be a truly formidable opponent with its wide range of abilities and powers. Thus, after the failure of several of its undead minions, the powerful mastermind decides to personally destroy the characters. Further, since it's already been established that this being prefers to use lesser undead, it's likely that the swordwraith would enter this battle aided (if not surrounded) by lesser undead beings, perhaps led by a guth-maren or an abyssal ghoul.

Swordwraith Template

This template can be added to any humanoid or monstrous humanoid creature with levels in fighter (hereafter referred to as the "base creature"). The creature's type changes to undead. It uses all the base creature's statistics and special abilities except as noted here.

Hit Dice: Increase to d12.

Special Attacks: A swordwraith retains all the special attacks of the base creature and also gains the following attack.

Strength Damage (Su): A creature struck by a swordwraith's melee weapon takes 1 point of temporary Strength damage in addition to normal damage from the weapon.

Special Qualities: A swordwraith retains all the special qualities of the base creature and also gains the following special qualities.

Damage Reduction (Su): A swordwraith's insubstantial-seeming body is tough, giving it DR 10/magic and slashing. Despite their appearance, swordwraiths are corporeal.

Turn Resistance (Ex): A swordwraith is treated as an undead with 2 more Hit Dice than it actually has for the purposes of turn, rebuke, command, or bolster attempts.

Abilities: Same as the base creature except that, as undead, it has no Constitution score.

Skills: Swordwraiths gain a +4 racial bonus on Hide and Move Silently checks.

Feats: Swordwraiths gain the Alertness and Iron Will feats.

Environment: Any land or underground.

Organization: Solitary, company (2-8), or squadron (11-20 plus 1 leader of 1-4 levels higher).

Challenge Rating: Same as the base creature +2.

Treasure: Standard.

Alignment: Usually lawful evil.

Advancement: By character class.

Level Adjustment: +3

Description: Swordwraiths appear much as they did in life, though their equipment is battered and dirty and their flesh seems insubstantial. In dim lighting or darkness, their eyes can be seen to glow a hot yellow like the sun. As most were mercenaries during their lives, many swordwraiths still wear insignia from the mercenary company or order they belonged to in life.

Bringing the Parts Together

If the heroes prevail, two things should come about. Their victory should be one that the players still talk about months or years from now as they discuss great battles they played in the past, and the players should be highly motivated to seek out the mastermind that has sent so many undead with death on their minds and these words on their lips, "I am sent to destroy you, and so you shall die." The insignia worn by the defeated swordwraiths can be the first clue in a train of evidence that eventually leads to the very doorstep of the master villain who tried for so long to prevent this very event from coming to pass: the PCs' payback for all the trouble they've been put through by this mastermind.

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